

HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS

The child playing in Megan McAuliffe's apartment is not hers. It's not even alive. This isn't the first haunting Megan has experienced, as she tells Karina Machado in a chilling memoir

It's 3am and, when I should be asleep, I'm sitting awake and alert on the sofa, as still and silent as the night itself, listening to what is going on inside my son's bedroom. "This isn't happening," I think, as I melt into the dark, shrinking to something small and inconspicuous. Divorced from their context, the sounds are not alarming: a drum beating a staccato rhythm. Toys rattling. Action figures at war. The rustle of hands plunging into the toy box, discarding some things and setting aside others in the hunt for something beloved.

But Jackson, my three-year-old son, is not in his room. And there is no-one else at home. I know it's the girl and I am beside myself with fear.

I walk to my bedroom and turn on the light. The rest of the apartment stays in darkness. There is Jackson, fast asleep in my bed where I'd placed him a couple of hours earlier. I watch him, his little chest swelling and sinking, the tips of his eyelashes sweeping his cheeks, and feel relieved that whatever it was that made him wake up wailing in his own bed had at least not followed him in here. I had woken to his cries five times, so I decided to move him into my room, even if it meant a night on the couch for me. I never slept well alongside my wriggly toddler.

With all thoughts of sleep forgotten, I slide into bed beside him, and listen to a stowaway at play in my son's room, never daring to go and investigate. ▶

For 90 minutes, the sounds of fun continue. Somehow, I've turned into a character in a film, a woman with wet eyes and a pounding heart, trapped and frightened out of her wits by something she can't explain. I'm not willing to move out of the room into the darkness. I don't want to see anything. I send a text message to my ex-partner, Jackson's London-based father, thinking at least he'll be awake. I tell him there is stuff going on in my house and that I'm scared. I need somebody to talk to. He helps me get my strength up to get out of the house and knock on the neighbour's door.

I gently shake my son awake. I tell him there's an animal in his room and that we need to get out of the house – it might be a rat and I need to take him. Clutching the phone, with Jackson on my hip, I gingerly open my bedroom door. I basically shut my eyes, go straight to the front door, turn on the light and run out of the house, down the stairs to the neighbour's. It is 5am.

The couple who answer are gracious and concerned, if a little baffled. They make breakfast for Jackson and pour tea. The husband is very sceptical, so they quickly say, "This is not happening, there is a logical explanation." At first light, the husband comes upstairs with Jackson and me. His first words are, "What *is* that feeling in here?" He crinkles up his nose at "this really awful smell". The atmosphere is thick and soupy and the musty, mouldy, smell of stagnation is everywhere – the opposite of the airy, light-filled flat I had fallen in love with.

The neighbour checks the apartment and offers various natural explanations for the night symphony, including birds outside the window. I thank him, but I know what I heard. I know that a ghostly little girl inhabits my lovely old apartment in Petersham, in Sydney's inner-west, because the child once wrapped her arms tightly, too tightly, around me in a pitiful, needy embrace.

At 37, I feel as if I'm split in two. Part of me works hard at my job as a website producer, looks after my six year old, is committed to my relationship with my partner, Antoine, a musician, and leads a busy and fulfilled life. The other half of me has secretly spent two decades trying to understand what happens to me under

cover of night. Basically, things attach to me and won't let go. I'm haunted.

The first time "it" happened, I was 17 and living in north-western Sydney, in a Catholic-Presbyterian household, with my parents and two brothers. One night, I was kind of aware of something opening the door and coming into my room, but I could see my room clear as day. I wasn't asleep. I know it sounds weird, but it was like an energy, like a figure made up of dots, and the next thing I knew I was telepathically communicating with this thing, saying "Leave, leave my room."

I remember it as a series of pictures, like the jerky frames in a sequence of time-lapse footage. I'm standing at the end of my bed, and this thing has its arms around me and it's trying to console me. I am struggling against it. Next thing

"The [spirit] became more brazen. It started getting into bed with me. I'd feel the covers move and I'd feel arms around me"

I know, I'm back in my bed, and it's kneeling next to me, stroking my hair, trying to calm me down because I'm panicking.

I know all about sleep paralysis, but this was something else. Once the paralysis lifted, the fear was still there, along with the sound that had announced the visitation. It was the sound of energy, like when you chafe the palms of your hands together, like a rubbing, like wings fluttering. And I was wide awake.

There was no escaping these visits, no matter where I was living, or with whom. The pattern was the same over the years. I'd hear the noise coming, know it was happening, and feel my body being paralysed. I just kept fighting it, but then the visitor became more brazen. It started getting into bed with me. I'd feel the covers move and I'd feel arms around me. I'd start fighting it and it would disappear, but it would always come back.

And it was not put off by another warm body in my bed. I'd been seeing my boyfriend for about three years and he'd hear me struggling in my sleep with something. He woke up one night and was in a real panic. I said, "What's wrong? What's happened?" and he said, "What does that thing look like, that thing that comes to you?" I said, "I don't know,

I don't look at it, I just feel it." And he said, "Well, I saw it. It was sitting on my chest warning me to keep away from you."

When I moved to the UK, it followed me, slinking away only when I fell pregnant with Jackson. But when he was 18 months old, it came back. I'd endured 15 years of this and it was finally time to seek some help. I understood that this was something menacing and to know that it was lurking in the one-bedroom apartment I shared with my baby galvanised me. I remember sitting on the sofa thinking, "What am I going to do about this?" The lights were off and I felt it in the room. I felt it at the sliding doors, over towards where Jackson was. I thought, "I've got to turn the light on", so I walked over to the kitchen, trying to keep calm. As I walked past, the doors started to



shake. There was no air, no movement in that place, to do that.

I hired a psychic with an excellent reputation to come and clear the apartment. He came in and said I had a very old earth-bound spirit around me. The spirit liked being with me because I reminded him of his daughters. He was a very heavy, masculine energy. The psychic said, "How did you fight him for so long?" As I had feared, his affection was more than fatherly. The psychic said he was in a repetitive pattern. He felt guilty and couldn't move on because he'd interfered with his daughters. Despite all this, the psychic lived up to his reputation for guiding the dead to where they're meant to be. That was the very last of him.

But it wasn't the last of my problems. I'd fallen in love with the Petersham apartment. Flooded with light, it had high ceilings, a gorgeous sunroom and a breezy, open aspect that appealed to me. And it pulsed with history. Now a chic apartment block, the property had once been the elegant, sprawling two-storey family home of Rollo Albert Cape, the one-time Mayor of Petersham.

In 1885, Cape's son, John Leslie, died at the house, aged only 22 days. Bound by Victorian mores, his mother surely swallowed her grief, but perhaps the walls ►

absorbed her anguish. In 1907, 22 years after his newborn shut his eyes for the last time, Cape also died in the stately home. Of course, I had no way of knowing this when I saw the flat. I just remember thinking, “This is *really* nice.” But there was someone watching me, thinking the same thing. For six months, she kept to the shadows. Then she stepped out.

Jackson was still quite young and we were having a nap during the day. I remember being woken up by a feeling of arms around me, like a little girl’s arms, but it wasn’t a nice feeling. It had this heaviness associated with it. It was like she was holding me a bit too tightly, and I got really angry at her. I said, “You are not able to be here. I do not want you here, leave!” I think I even swore at her.

Next, the noises started; random bangs that startled us. You would know where the noise came from – it was the door that made it, or the table – but it sounded like a hand was coming down making the noise. I just tried to push it

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to the back of my mind. We’d be sitting on the sofa watching TV at night and Antoine would come and say, “There are toys playing in Jackson’s room, but he’s asleep”, and I’d go, “Oh, OK.”

But ignoring the activity only intensified it. One Saturday, while I was out shopping, Antoine was having an afternoon nap. Before turning in, he’d placed his bass guitar carefully against the wall in the living room, as he always did. An ear-splitting bang, with a strumming undertone, woke him. He rushed out to the lounge to find the guitar in the middle of the lounge room, teetering on its slim spine. A bass guitar is not very thick at all, and it’s heavy, so the likelihood of it being able to balance like that is next to nothing. He was in quite a state.

After that, things started to get really weird for us. Our relationship fell apart. One afternoon, I came home from work to find Antoine, and all his belongings, gone. Two days later, he called, sounding bewildered, saying he’d gone back to his ex-partner, but had no idea why he’d made such a drastic move. He’s a good person, but he hurt Jackson and me by leaving. It was very out of character.

It was two nights later – about a year after she’d hugged me – that the little girl turned up for a solo play date in Jackson’s room. I was ready to move out and called my estate agent. I told him what had been going on and asked him to find me a new flat. He promised to have a look, but he never turned up, and I rallied, somehow finding the courage to stay put and get through it.

Jackson moved out of his room completely. He’s never mentioned anything to me, he just didn’t like being in there.

Then, four months after he’d left, Antoine came back into our lives. He’d only been in the house for a few hours, when the atmosphere turned. As we stood chatting quietly in the sunroom, there was an almighty crash in the bathroom. An antique mirror was in shards on the tiles. For two years, it hadn’t been moved from the bathroom windowsill and it had never fallen. All of a sudden, it leapt off the window and smashed on the floor in the middle of the bathroom.

I think the child spirit resented Antoine’s presence in our lives. For some reason, it upset the equilibrium. I think she felt at peace with just Jackson and I pottering about. Him coming back changed things too much for her.

Another house clearing was called for. The psychic was very hippie. Antoine and I were sitting there going, “This is a bit weird”, but whatever she did was effective. She walked straight into Jackson’s room and said, “There is a little girl in here”, and she sat down in a corner of the room and wailed and cried and said, “There is so much sadness here.” She told me the toddler was aged three when she had died of an illness. She said she was attached to me, and she liked Jackson being around. She felt I was like her mum. Then the psychic moved her on.

Was that the end? If only.

I’d also felt a very dark energy in the house – not just the little girl, I’d felt something else come in and I think it was a malevolent energy. The day after the psychic had cleared the house of the child, Antoine and I started smelling urine really strongly. We would be asleep and I would wake up with this urine

odour in my face. Together, we turned the house upside down searching for the source of the stench. It turned out to be coming from a pocket of space near my wardrobe, down on the floor, where the carpet was strangely dry to the touch.

This was the last straw. We took to sleeping with a crucifix. Antoine would wear it around his neck, or I would hold it tight. I’d bought it in the UK because I’d liked the look of it, but it became something I reached for at night. In the end, I was exhausted. If it was my duty to be in that particular apartment at that particular point in time to “learn how to move on earth-bound spirits”, as the psychic who cleared the ghost child suggested, then I wasn’t ready for it.

We moved out in 2009. When Antoine was returning the keys, the estate agent (not the one I’d consulted earlier) blindsided him by asking, “Has your ghost gone?” Antoine was stunned. “How did you know?” The agent chuckled, and explained that he used to own the unit next door and that his brother woke up twice to see a little girl sitting on the end of his bed. That was confirmation for me.

Today, Antoine, Jackson and I have moved into a brand-spanking new place. I said, “No more old, let’s go for the new.” But we have an old problem. Barely a week into our tenure, I got up in the middle of the night to grab a drink of water. I padded down the long parquet corridor to the fridge and was opening the door when the sound of footsteps turned my innards to ice. I heard this “bang, bang, bang” coming down the hall, and I thought, “It can’t be happening!” Two days later, Antoine said he’d heard the same thing.

Two months ago, the toys in Jackson’s room began to ring out. I woke up Antoine, and he heard it. We rationalised it. I said, “No, Jackson’s feet were dangling over the edge of his bed, near his toy box, maybe his feet were moving.” Then I heard it again. Neither of us has gone to explore. ■

An edited extract of Where Spirits Dwell by Karina Machado (Hachette, \$32.99). In stores from September.

